

Reconstructing Rockwell

How an American icon became an artist

BY CHRISTINA LARSON

ARTISTS ELIGIBLE FOR CRITICAL ACCOLADES are expected to wrestle down psychological demons. Scholars pontificate upon Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Edvard Munch's "The Scream," and even Hendrix's "Manic Depression," but how many art historians peruse Norman Rockwell's "Boy Scouts' Calendar"?

If you thought that the great romanticizer of small-town America didn't fit the tortured-creative mold, Laura Claridge's new biography, *Norman Rockwell*, will change your mind. Its revelations about the artist's private life, which scarcely resemble his defining Hallmark-card iconography, clear the way for Rockwell to enter the critics' pantheon of serious American artists. (Of course, the rest of us have long been charmed by his command of posture and facial expression and by his fastidious attention to details.)

Having rifled through Rockwell's family medical records and gossiped with old neighbors, Claridge has turned up the sorry details of the longtime *Saturday Evening Post* illustrator's personal battles with depression and the alleged suicides of his first two wives. In the upside-down world of art criticism, such exposure seems to be a prerequisite to regarding the painter as more than a two-dimensional workaholic patriot.

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Claridge's book, released to coincide with a major Rockwell exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, is the latest scholarly reappraisal to resist the decades-old exclusion of commercial illustrators from art history syllabi. She reminds us that making a living as an artist often requires accommodating public taste, and that, unlike today's public, the middle-class Americans of Rockwell's time didn't openly discuss Prozac prescriptions or believe that self-expression was always a good thing.



NORMAN ROCKWELL
by Laura Claridge
Random House, \$35.00

Norman D-Day

Rockwell was born in 1894, a year before Oscar Wilde's "indecent" trials damned the literary virtuoso's career for offending public decorum. As the second son of a Yankee cotton merchant of English descent, Rockwell grew up in Harlem's Morningside Heights, dropped out of high school to attend art school in New York (financed, just barely, by a paper route and some early pupils). He then worked for a boys' magazine as art editor and cover artist before placing his first cover with the *Post* in 1916, at the age of 22. Except for a brief stint in the Navy (as a varnisher and painter, third-class) during World War I, he worked as an illustrator for his entire life, mostly in New England, painting 322 covers for the *Post*, as well as illustrating hundreds of advertising campaigns.

His time at the *Post* coincided with the magazine's heyday, when it reached more than 4 million households weekly; but by his departure in 1963, the old mag-

azine was wheezing for subscriptions. Rockwell painted a series on the civil rights movement for *Look* magazine in the '60s, but by then, the influence of the illustrators had waned significantly. Before he died in 1978, the commercial viability of the trade had been all but eclipsed by photography and video technology.

A bit like Mark Twain's portrait of all-American boy Tom Sawyer, Rockwell's paintings enshrined certain wholesome archetypes in American consciousness: the good-humored, commonsensical guy-next-door, the industrious shopkeeper, the earnest daydreamer. During his prime in the 1930s and '40s, Rockwell was a mythmaker for the generation of Americans who lived through the humiliation and despair of unemployment during the Depression, and later, the fear and urgencies of World War II.

His "Four Freedoms" paintings, based on a speech by FDR, sold over \$100 million in war bonds. In another series of wartime *Post* covers, he chronicled the war experiences of a fictional character, Willie Gillis, whom Rockwell described as "an inoffensive, ordinary little guy thrown into the chaos of war." The little guy living up to a larger sense of duty is a typically Rockwellian theme, and an idea which resonated strongly with the World War II generation. As proof that the public took Rockwell's art for fact, hundred of letters from Gillises across the country poured in to inquire about the fate of their long-lost relative.

Although he was in tune with the great historical movements of his time, Rockwell seemed aloof from the contemporaneous shifts in high-art sensibility. Born in the era of Pre-Raphaelites painting sentimental images as a form of moral instruction, Rockwell lived to see Modernist philosophy accepted as orthodoxy. While his microréalist technique and penchant for visual storytelling remained almost unchanged from World War I right through the civil rights era, the high art world progressed through Cubism, Fauvism, Bauhaus movement, Dadaism, Surrealism, Abstract Impressionism, Pop Art, and Minimalism.

In truth, Rockwell wasn't so much oblivious to these movements as he was unable to achieve commercial success with them. For a brief stint in the late '20s, he studied Picasso, hung Cubist paintings in his studio, and struggled to integrate modernist techniques with his traditional storytelling method during what he later referred to as his "James Joyce-Gertrude Stein period." His efforts were a failure in the eyes of then-*Post* editor George Horace Lorimer, and Rockwell soon went back to the crowd-pleasing scenes he did best.

His contemporaries in the high-art world, many of whom never actually made a living as artists, scorned

Rockwell as a "mere illustrator," a wholesome but backward bumpkin who wouldn't know Monet from Manet. In the early 20th century, the art-for-art's-sake movement damned commercial artists to a lucrative, but spiritually vacuous, place on the art totem pole.

But today's art connoisseurs are taking a second look. As *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl says, "Rockwell is terrific. It's become too tedious to pretend that he isn't."

Sex, Drugs and Rockwell?

Popular interest in Rockwell began to revive in 1994, the centennial of his birth and the year after the Rockwell Museum debuted in an elaborate new building in Stockbridge, Mass., where Rockwell lived his last years.

Then a few lonely critics—notably Robert Rosenblum, contributing editor of *Artforum* and curator of 20th-century art at the Guggenheim, and Dave Hickey, iconoclastic professor of art criticism at the University of Nevada Las Vegas—confessed that they actually liked Rockwell. His originals became hot items at high-end art auctions, with "The Watchmaker" fetching \$937,500 at Sotheby's in 1996. Ross Perot and Steven Spielberg boasted of being fans.

In 1999, Atlanta's High Museum of Art collaborated with the Rockwell Museum to organize the first major touring collection of the artist's work, which includes stops at such respected galleries as the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the San Diego Museum of Art, and the Guggenheim.

Claridge, a former English professor at the U.S. Naval Academy, first encountered a Rockwell canvas in 1995 on a family vacation at the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Having previously seen only low-grade reproductions on calendars and other memorabilia, she was impressed by his masterly composition and technique. She undertook biographical research and soon found herself caught up in the rising revisionist tide.

She dug through the archives of the Rockwell Museum, spoke with its crusading museum director, Laurie Norton Moffat, as well as with each of Rockwell's three sons. She combed through family medical records and extracted secrets from opinionated neighbors. Unfortunately, she drums up every hint of scandal, while sometimes shortchanging the actual body of Rockwell's work.

In trying to convince the reader that her research fills a critical scholarly void, she has a tendency to overstate her case. Her opening line implies a debate that never occurred: "Norman Rockwell was not sadistic." This line—as well as her dramatic musings—

might have worked well in a novel, but in the context of a biography, it seems overripe. For example: "Imagining the family scene where Norman Rockwell undertook his first drawing proves irresistible ... Norman, those intelligent, restless eyes signaling that he thought he could do just as well as his brother, quickly realized that he could do even better." Those restless, intelligent eyes?

Admitting to a crush on her subject in her introduction, Claridge fixates partisanly on the unhappy details of Rockwell's married life. His first wife, Irene, struggled with depression during their 14-year marriage, filed for divorce, and within two years landed at McLean Sanitarium, the New England asylum later home to such famous guests as Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell. When Irene drowned in her bathtub, rumors of a suicide circulated.

Rockwell's second wife, Mary, sought treatment for depression and alcoholism at the private mental institution Austen Riggs in Stockbridge, Mass. While the family was living in Arlington, Vt. in the early '50s, Mary drove more than an hour and a half to Riggs each week when she wasn't staying there for months at a time. Eventually, the family just moved to Stockbridge.

Rockwell himself also sought professional assistance. When, or precisely why, he sought treatment for depression from Riggs' famous psychologist Erik Erikson is not known. Claridge teases the reader with reporting on the existence of his medical records, but provides few details.

Mary died at age 51 of heart failure, and Rockwell reportedly told his nephew, Dick, that he feared that she, too, had committed suicide. The book gauges the impact of these events on Rockwell mostly through the recollections of relatives and neighbors: "Those who interacted with the widower usually mention that Norman Rockwell walked around for the next year like a marked man." But the narrative never gives the sense of having penetrated the artist's psyche.

Neither, despite her harshness toward Rockwell's wives, does Claridge explore why Rockwell was so drawn to dark women. Did their melancholy allow them to understand Rockwell at a level that his editors and public never could? Were they his muses, or merely distractions? Or was the optimistic crowd-pleaser simply a magnet for needy women?

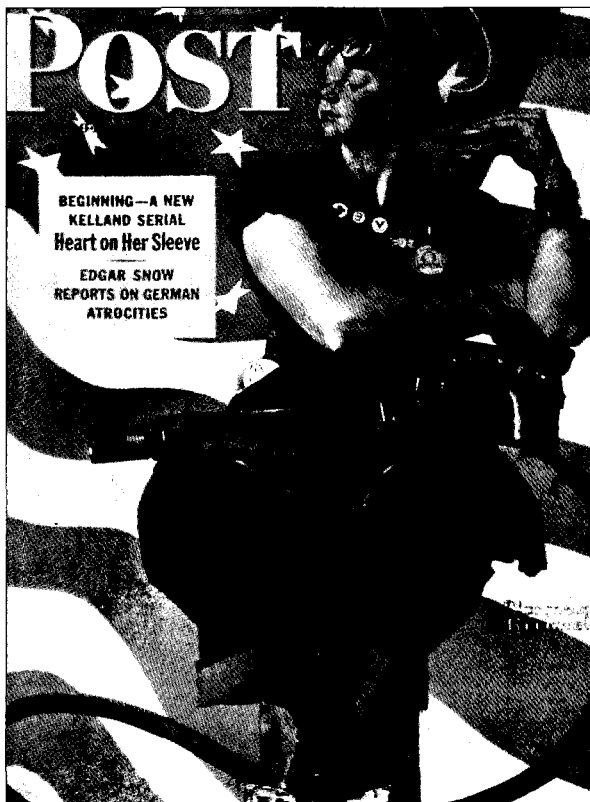
What Claridge does make abundantly clear is the financial cost of mental health treatment in an era when thorazine was just making its debut. Beginning in the '50s, Rockwell handled fewer covers for the *Post* in order to take on more lucrative commissions from

such companies as Mutual Life Insurance and Kellogg's Corn Flakes to pay for school tuition and Mary's private therapy. Treatment at Riggs ran \$1,800 a month—an enormous sum that in today's dollars would amount to more than \$12,500.

In the end, Claridge's exposition of Rockwell's complicated personal history leaves the reader with many unanswered questions, primarily: Why does all this come as such a surprise? After all, many of her sources were public records. His first two wives' deaths were noted in local and national papers, and Rockwell's 1960 autobiography, *My Adventures as An Illustrator*, alludes to his depression. But a quarter-century after his death, none of this has been incorporated into the Rockwell myth.

Perhaps this was because Rockwell, a proper New Englander at heart, had no private inclination or public encouragement to exploit his personal tragedies. He also couldn't afford to alienate patrons like the *Post*, which catered to 4 million middle-class Americans. But Claridge's research now allows us to wonder:

If affordable mental health treatment like Prozac had been available in Rockwell's day, perhaps the artist could have passed on the Knox Gelatin commissions, indulged his darker impulses, and joined the avant-garde. ●



Rosie the Riveter, an iconic Rockwell creation, on a 1943 *Post* cover

Political Booknotes

Ur-Conservatives

By Franklin Foer

IN THE EARLY SIXTIES, THIS country's leading rightist was a candy manufacturer from Cambridge, Mass., named Robert Welch. He followed his wildly successful promotion of the Sugar Daddy with his wildly successful promotion of the John Birch Society. Both a crank and salesman of the highest order, Welch managed to simultaneously place the popular ex-president Dwight Eisenhower at the center of a communist conspiracy and to build an army of suburban supporters. His movement grew large enough to warrant the cover of *Time* and a denunciation from President Kennedy.

Welch's heyday, however, was fleeting. By the '70s he'd been shoved to the fringe of the political scene, causing him to grow even crankier. In 1979, he published a pamphlet called, "False Leadership: William F. Buckley, Jr. and the New World Order." The *National Review* editor, he surmised, craved "a place in the Establishment which he professes to oppose, in the expectation of sharing influence with such as [sic] Henry Kissinger and the House of Rockefeller in a New World Order."

There's a lesson to be gleaned. While liberals consider Buckley to be a wing-nut, he's far from the real deal. Yet the conservative confectioner wasn't entirely nutty. He had some rational reasons for despising Buckley. More than anyone, Buckley had discredited the John Birch Society. In the pages of *National Review*, Buckley denounced Welch for "distorting reality." And in conservative circles, he demanded that the movement marginalize the Birchers.

In a nutshell, the Buckley-Welch feud is the story of conservatism—and the story told in Jonathan Schoenwald's admirable narrative. According to Schoenwald's thesis, American conservatism only succeeded after it banished the conspiratorial extremists like Welch from its ranks. This wasn't such a painless task. For Buckley, disavowing the Birchites meant disavowing thousands of the subscribers to his own magazine. (A month after *National Review's* first anti-Welch editorial appeared, William Rusher, the magazine's publisher, counted twenty donors who had revoked donations to NR and dozens of canceled subscriptions.) For conservative politicians, dissing the extremists was even more unpleasant. It potentially meant alienating rank-and-file voters and activists with a ferocious appetite for campaign drudgery.

But it was a necessary task. Without creating daylight between the extreme right, conservatism would have relegated itself to the fringe.

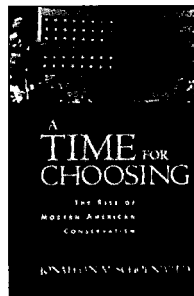
And in 1964, this looked exactly like what would happen. During his presidential campaign, Barry Goldwater had stubbornly resisted the advice of Buckley and refused to condemn the Birchers. "I am far more concerned, frankly, with the extremists to the left than I am with the extremists to the right," he told *Meet the Press* host Lawrence Spivak. Accepting the Republican nomination, he even seemed to pipe up on their behalf. "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice," he famously bellowed. Of course, this was not such a wise line. The moderate wing of the Republican party—Nelson Rockefeller, William Scranton and Mark O. Hatfield—lashed him at his own convention for condoning kooks and segregationists. At every turn, the

Johnson campaign suggested that Goldwater himself was an unstable, radical character. The Johnson strategy worked devastatingly well. Goldwater went down, 61 percent to 39 percent, one of the ugliest defeats in American political history.

In conservative lore, Goldwater is remembered as a heroic figure—the romantic warrior who survived the abuse of the liberal elite by clinging to unpopular principles. In reality, he was an object lesson. Ronald Reagan's 1966 campaign for California's governorship set the template for future conservative campaigns. The Gipper's key move: to downplay ideology and translate the tough theory of conservatism—its libertarian harangues and traditionalist asceticism—into accessible anecdotes and sunny sloganeering. He chose the "creative society" as his mantra. In other words, he ran a campaign that prefigured George W. Bush's compassionate conservatism. Although Reagan exploited anxiety over riots and crime, like Bush, he made gaudy appeals to African American voters and blurred his differences with his liberal foes.

Of course, it's possible to exaggerate the conservatives' success. They've never entirely been able to scrub off the tinge of extremism. Bill Clinton, for one, successfully tied Newt Gingrich and the congressional Republicans to Timothy McVeigh and the militia freaks. Republicans usually invited the linking. Unlike Reagan, the congressional Republicans spoke in militant tones and seemed to breathe hatred for government. Still, Schoenwald's thesis holds up pretty well. He seems to have persuasively identified the moment in conservative history—in the mid-Sixties—when the movement shed its heaviest baggage, toned down its ideological ranting, and took over the Republican Party.

More than any American political movement—certainly more than liberalism—conservatism has received lavish scholarly and journalistic attention. The best political histories and biographies of the past two decades have traced the genealogy of the movement. (See Sam Tanenhaus's *Whittaker Chambers* and John Judis's *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conser-*



A TIME FOR CHOOSING:
The Rise of Modern American
Conservatism

by Jonathan Schoenwald
Oxford University Press, \$35.00